



PERFECT PAST TO UNCERTAIN FUTURE?

Arabian Horse Manifesto is the name of a Global Network of Lovers of Asil Horses with the claim to save this precious heritage of Bedouin culture.

Desert Heritage Magazine asked two members of the board for their thoughts on the new initiative.

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A year ago, a group of 32 breeders and lovers of the Arabian horse from the Arabian and western world published a policy paper under the name **The Arabian Horse Manifesto**. It is rooted in the socio-cultural values of the breed's first custodians, the Arab Bedouins, and a belief in the potential of science. It aims at guiding future endeavor to preserve the Arabian horse.



Outline of The Arabian Horse Manifesto

(In full - www.arabianhorsemanifesto.org)

The Arabian horse is currently at a critical juncture of its millennia old history. Over the last hundred years, the Arabian horse has witnessed a fundamental transformation of the environmental and social context that has shaped its unique qualities. Bedouin nomadic life no longer exists. Today, with very few exceptions, the Arabian horse lives in farms and stables all over the world, rather than around the tents of the Bedouins of Arabia. This global reach raises the question of the impact of this transformation on the breed's identity and defining qualities. The Manifesto is the collective effort of its Founders. All have a deep understanding of the breed's cultural aspects, stemming either from their identities as Arab and/or Bedouin, or from a respect for Bedouin horse-breeding values. This initiative is built on top of previous efforts by existing organizations and independent researchers.

VISION

The vision is a new era of the Arabian horse, based on the acknowledgement of its original qualities, and the adoption of modern science in establishing the future of the breed.

MISSION

The Arabian Horse Manifesto aims at setting a common direction for the community of the Arabian horse at large, including breeders, researchers, registration bodies, and academia, and maintaining its authenticity and quality.





Bedouin, 1900

Mounted Bedouins

Bedouin horse camel, 1932

Aref Bedouin sheikhs, 1932
(Matson collection)



VALUES

The Arabian horse represents a valuable cultural heritage for humanity.

The Arabian horse is one of the oldest horse breeds in history.

The Arabian horse enjoys some unique qualities and traits.

The Arabian horse's original homeland is the steppes of Arabia.

The Arabian horse is the product of the Arab Bedouin culture.

IDENTITY PRINCIPLES

Culture: Any definition of the Arab breed must comply with the cultural values ascribed to it by its original custodians, the Arab Bedouin tribes of Arabia.

Authenticity: The term atiq is ancient, precious, and free [of flaws] all at the same time. It encompasses authenticity, purity and quality. Purity is a cultural notion, which the Arab Bedouins always strived to maintain.

Authenticity, in this context, is the quality of going back to ancient, preserved, protected Bedouin sources.

Integrity: We accept the integrity of the Arab horse breed as it has reached us from its trusted original Bedouin sources, and it is our duty to maintain it for the future.

Information: Information is essential for determining the asil status. Without evidence attesting to its Bedouin provenance, a horse cannot be authenticated as asil.

Context: Traditional Bedouin values and breeding practices provide the context for accepting the authenticity of a Bedouin horse as atiq.

Reasonable Assumptions: When definitive evidence is not available, reasonable assumptions, rather than black-and-white evidence, are the practical means for reaching any conclusion on the asil status of modern Arab horses. Reasonable assumptions are based on solid research and on informed analysis of evidence put in context.



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Characteristics: The identifying characteristics of the breed are diverse and mutually reinforcing; they include morphological, functional, and genetic aspects. The nobility and elegance of the Arabian horse derive from its functional characteristics, and are largely shaped by the ecological environment and living conditions of its original habitat of Bedouin Arabia.

Diversity: Morphological diversity is a positive sign of the breed's vitality and genetic diversity. Variation within the breed's morphology, type is to be accepted within the normal boundaries originally observed in its original habitat of Bedouin Arabia. No single selective type or "look" is to be imposed on the breed.

Preservation: Preserving the Arab breed means maintaining its integrity and original qualities for future generations. Characteristics not observed in its original habitat of Bedouin Arabia are against the foundational integrity of the breed.

Selection: Selection is an important element of the breed conservation. While a larger set of strains existed in the possession of the Bedouins, only a subset consisting of the most authentic strains was mated with qualified stallions to maintain the atiq qualities of their horses.

Science: Scientific progress can provide evidence to assist in determining the authenticity of a horse. With historical research it can help maintain the foundation integrity of the breed for future generations.

Breed Ecosystem: The interconnected system of breeding, competition, registration, trade, and research is critical to preserve the authenticity and characteristics of the atiq horse as outlined in the above principles.

DEFINITION

The Arabian Horse traces through all its ancestors to the atiq horses of the Arab people.

Arabians are asil by definition. For a horse to be assumed asil, it's pedigree must be exclusively based on



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Davenport's first Arabian horses imported more than 100 years ago to the U.S. from the Arabian Peninsula

1 Abejah
2 Haleb
3 Muson

4 Reshan-Mildred
5 Hamrah
6 Euphrates

the breeding of the Arab Bedouin tribes in its homeland, the horse must be free of any cross breeding to non-Arabian horses represented by definite evidence of impurity (hujna), and carry a recognized strain name (rasan) and sub-strain (marbat) as per the Bedouin norms that can be reasonably assumed correct.

A horse is only Arabian if both free of hujna, and of known acceptable origin.

DEFINITION NOTES

HOMELAND

The homeland of the Arabian horse covers a vast region in Southwest Asia following the migrations of the Bedouin tribes. The core of this region is the Arabian Peninsula known as Arabia and the surrounding area to the North including the Syria and Iraqi deserts. The complete homeland stretches further North to encompass the area surrounding the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers known as Mesopotamia.

Considering the migrations of the Bedouins beyond Arabia, and the presence of other nations and cultures in the immediate surroundings, the true boundaries of the Arabian horse homelands are more cultural than territorial.



1 Mowarda, 2 Gomusa, 3 Haffia, 4 Werdi, 5 Wadduda, 6 El Bulad, 7 Urfah

"We still have existing sire lines in Davenport breeding to *Deyr (an Ubayyan Sharrak) and *Muson (a Kuhaylan Muhsin). We still have existing dam lines in Davenport breeding to *Reshan and *Werdi (pictured), as well as *Hadba, and to *Galfia, of the Hamidie group from the 1893 World's Fair. *Urfah and *Wadduda are present as dam lines in Al Khamsa generally, and are of international importance as dam lines of WAHO breeding everywhere."

Jeanne Craver, Al Khamsa organisation.

RASAN AND MARBAT

Arab Bedouins sought atiq horses at trusted Bedouin studs (marabat) and identified them with a rasan-marbat name. Rasan and marbat encapsulate the Bedouin traditions around the breed and establish the asil identity for any individual horse. Losing the rasan means complete loss of identity. Losing the marbat poses a significant risk to the asil standing. When an asil horse is mated to a non-Arabian horse, the product of such a cross loses its rasan-marbat identity. It is a hujna horse.

HUJNA

Hujna means a definite sign of crossbreeding to non-Arabian blood. Hujna signs can be morphological, genealogical or genetic.

ASIL CONDITIONS

To authenticate a horse as asil, there are two conditions:

It must have direct and/or indirect contextual evidence about the Arab Bedouin origin of all its ancestors that can be reasonably assumed valid. It must be free of hujna, meaning the absence of any definite (unspeculative) proof of hujna.





Badawi CF



Zachary CF



Ayar Peiper

OBJECTIVE EVALUATION

Evidence must be objectively evaluated using the definition above subject to the information available concerning horse origin, breeding and acquisition. A variety of evidence types and research methods can be used in the evaluation process.

OBJECTIVE EVIDENCE

There are two categories of objective evidence that determine asil standing: Evidence of origin and evidence of hujna.

Evidence of origin

Evidence of Arab Bedouin origin is heuristic and provisional, which builds credibility rather than provides ultimate proof. This is based on three fields of research:

Historical

Establishes the genealogical connection of all ancestors of a certain horse to the breeding of the Arab Bedouin tribes as per the definition. Historical evidence may include but is not limited to studbooks, pre-studbook records or documents, breeding records, testimony, and contextual research.

Social/Cultural

Establishes the credibility of a breeder/source of a certain horse and its eligibility as a Bedouin breeder or a trusted broker of an eligible Bedouin breeder.

Genetic/DNA

Establishes lineages through maternal or paternal lines or shows no contradiction with the assumed origin. This is an area subject to continuous research and scientific advances.



Pulcher Ibn Reshan



Eldar HD



HH Obsidian Krush



Barbican CF

EVIDENCE OF Hujna

Definitive and unspulative evidence that can be any or all the following:

Genealogy

Represented in the existence of proven non-asil blood at any level in the horse's extended pedigree.

Morphology

Morphology has always been used by the Arabs to exclude individual horses with clear signs of hujna such as certain coat colors or skeletal structures. Efforts shall be taken to build guidelines for definite morphological signs of hujna.

Genetic Markers

Modern studies on the Arabian horse genome may be able to indicate definitive marks of non-Arabian blood. This is an area subject to continuous research and scientific advances.

CERTAINTY RISK

Information that is incomplete or conflicting poses a certainty risk that does not necessarily lead to revoking an asil determination. A horse that is definitively known as not asil is not to be confused with a horse with incomplete information that can still be reasonably assumed asil. Research can lead to levels of certainty within the asil population, that are up to the community to decide how to deal with. Complete lack of information about Arab Bedouin origin does not permit authentication as asil.

ASIL MAINTENANCE

The authentication of a horse as asil must be maintained and can be lost based on the discovery of new information, or scientific research that reveals previously hidden hujna.

ASIL REVOCATION

The asil quality is inherited from both parents together and cannot be revoked while both parents are still assumed asil. Losing the asil status of a horse previously assumed asil is based on violating any of the two asil conditions above by new evidence that definitively proves hujna, and/or de-validates previous information leaving no attestation to reasonably assume Arab Bedouin origin.

GOVERNANCE

Determining the asil status of modern horses is a research effort, not a legal judgment. It represents the conviction of a certain research body, certification organization, or registration authority to adhere to the definition above.

Research methods should be well-defined and transparent.

Authentication organizations can only provisionally declare their stand toward the asil status of a certain horse, rather than establish a historical fact.



Iras



Lysander



HH Odin Krush



FMimmack71, SergeantMajor21

1996, Shammar Hamdaniet Ibn Ghorab Mares



1996, Tai Shuweymah Mare and Saddle



The meaning behind important Arabian expressions:

ASIL The term in its general Arabic use (also for people) means of known and esteemed origins.

Within the context of the Arabian horse, the term is equivalent to purity.

ATIQ (plural ITAQ) The term carries multiple overlapping meanings. It is ancient, precious, and free [of flaws] all at the same time. Within the context of the Arabian horse, it encompasses both authenticity and purity.

RASAN Translated as strain. The original meaning in Arabic is rope, which is used to tie an individual mare. It refers to a certain original mare (or group of mares) that founded a certain family of asil horses several centuries ago within some foundational marbat's. Rasan and marbat is a notion that is believed to have been established circa the 12th century AD.

MARBAT Often translated as sub-strain. In Arabic the word is derived from the verb rabat, to tie, it means a stud, where mares are tied, that can be accepted as a trusted source of a certain strain. A widely celebrated marbat then becomes a branch of the original strain, or a sub-strain.

HUJNA The term in its general Arabic use means admixture with lower quality ingredients. It indicates degradation and flaws. For horses it means crossbreeding to non-Arabian blood.

1996, Tai Muniqi Hadruj Stallion



1996, Group of Shammar Mares
(Photographs Joe Ferriss)





Interview with

Saria Almarzook and Matthias Oster

both are foundation members of **The Arabian Horse Manifesto**

Desert Heritage: Is my understanding correct, that the positions of Manifesto can be regarded as a backlash against the last century's colonization of Arabian horses and the Bedouin culture by the West?

Matthias Oster: Our position and our goals can be summarized in many points and the major point is the return to the original understanding of the Arabian horse which has been set by its original breeders, the Bedouin. During the last 100 years, mainly beginning after World War I, a fatal separation took place between the Arabian horse and its former master, the Bedouin. On one hand it has found refuge with us in the West, but beauty ideals and racing sports and the introgression of foreign blood, have changed the breed in prominent parts to a frightening degree.





Dr. rer.agr. Saria Almarzook
Saria Almarzook is a German-Syrian researcher, who was born and grew up in Syria, close to the Euphrates, and now makes her home in Berlin, Germany. Almarzook has studied equine science and got her PhD in Genetics and Biodiversity of Arabian horses, and a Master's degree in Natural Resources Management from the Humboldt University of Berlin. She was editor-in-chief of the first Arabian horse magazine in

Syria between 2010 and 2012. "Biodiversity in the Arabian Horses" was her first published book (2018), followed by historical and scientific research and articles about equine-related topics. Almarzook is committed to the roles that researchers, universities, and other educational and cultural institutions play as homes of equine research. This commitment has been shaped by experiences and relationships made in academic institutions and publishing houses in Berlin, Krakow, Vienna, Cairo, Abu Dhabi, and Damascus. It is a commitment that underpins Almarzook's work as a researcher, lecturer and a translator with a focus on horse-relevant books, like the German book entitled "Pferde" (horses), written by Jenny F-Freksa and translated into Arabic by Almarzook and published by Kalima Project - Abu Dhabi.



Dr. med.vet Matthias Oster

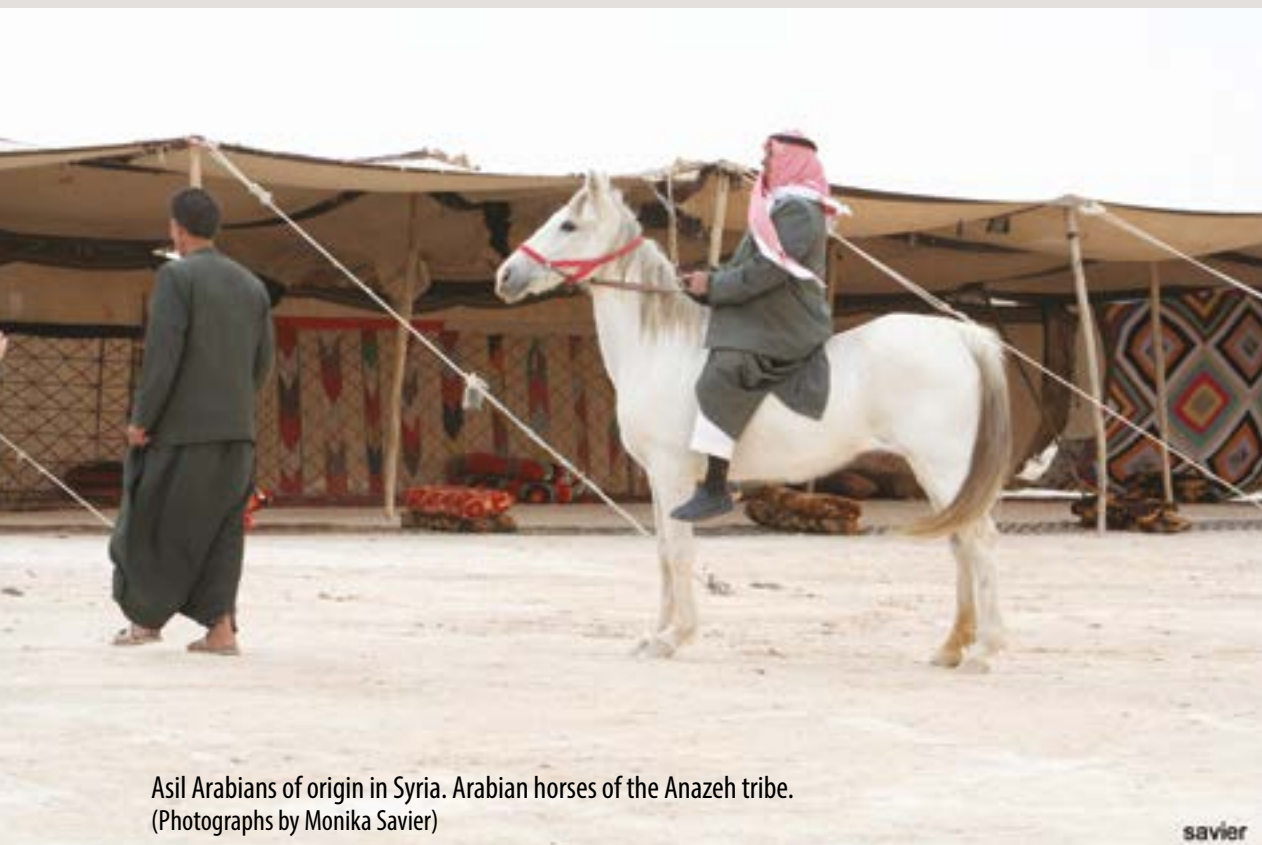
Born in 1961, he is a veterinarian and equine practitioner in Germany. Together with his wife Gabriele, daughter of the late Günter W. Seidlitz, one of the founders of THE PYRAMID SOCIETY EUROPE and breeder of such renowned individuals as Messaoud, JKB Masouda or Montasar, he is dedicated to the asil breeding within the Straight Egyptian lines. Both serve on the board of Asil Club and Pyramid Society Europe respectively. The fascination and love for the Arabian horse and the wish to understand its uniqueness have let Matthias to a thorough study of the Bedouin past and the publishing of the book BEDOUIN HERITAGE – THE WORLD OF THE ARABIAN HORSE. More information on their horses and the book can be found under www.arabianheritagesource.com



Saria Almarzook: The western breeders, selected Arabian stallions and mares according to their needs and modified some traits accordingly. When these modified horses were imported again to the Middle East, they were received with open arms and even celebrated as heroes. According to our best knowledge, the western-bred Arabian horses have their own potential and some very good phenotypic and genetic traits, but we think they are distinct from the original ones. A new term has been invented to present these superior show and racing horses in their homeland: 'improved Arabians'. Our aim is to raise the consciousness of Arabian horse breeders, towards preserving the original Arabian horse's lines, in a similar ambient and environment where the original pure-bred Arabian horses have been raised and developed naturally and with the help of their breeders, mainly the Bedouin. The topic is not related to the fourth value, as most people think, where the breeders insist that the original home of Arabian horses is the Arabian Peninsula, or the Arab region. This issue is not confirmed by scientific evidence, but it is historically and culturally agreed upon, therefore it is widely accepted by both Eastern and Western Arabian horse breeders. Therefore, I do not think that the topic is a hostile reaction to the issue of Western colonization of the culture of Arabian horses as much as a reminder of the basic principles of breeding Arabian horses.

Desert Heritage: If the demand is for sovereignty of interpretation on the origin and selection of the Arabian horse, does it make sense that Europeans and Americans belong to the multicultural team of founders?

Matthias Oster: We are a team, and our members reflect our globalized world that is true for the Arabian horse not only in our millennium but already in the past 19th and 20th century. We westerners feel the same obligation towards the values we have expressed in the Manifesto that is only a starting point and must be filled with life. Some of us already have a life-long devotion to the Bedouin horse and our experience, both good and bad, can be a real asset to our future work. So far, we are only an independent "Think Tank" so to speak. 32 experts on all facets of the Arabian horse: researchers, scientists, breeders and riders from around the world with experience, knowledge, competence and relations, both in the East and West.



Desert Heritage: Members of various Arabian horse societies are already dwindling. Can the Manifesto flourish in this situation?

Matthias Oster: Regressing numbers of members are only a symptom of a morbid condition of the “Arabian” scene, if I may say this from a veterinarian’s perspective. It is only a symptom among many that reflects the widespread frustration among breeders in the West. The disease state is much more complex and presents itself differently in the Orient. There, enthusiasm is very high, even greater than the one in the West back in the 1970s and 1980s. Nevertheless, many things are lying badly especially there. What is in the spotlight – a competition on the halter shows and races fueled by big funds and the urge to assert oneself, today threatens the remaining original desert horses, as we have already stated above. But there is still enthusiasm and love for the Arabian horse, expressed in public in the East, in the West today mostly hidden in the so called back-yards of daily life with our horses. One of the most important issues for our future work will be to support riding for pleasure or sports with Arabian horses, in order to find a balance with the dominant use of the horses only for breeding.

Saria Almarzook: Arabian horses have been selected by humans and nature which made them unique among other horse breeds and livestock animals because of their traits and capabilities, and it will be great if we re-consider our breeding trends and broaden our current breeding scope. We believe that the Arabian horse market (in the east and west) has major challenges, and researchers warned breeders of the consequences of collapsing of the Arabian breeding industry in the last few decades, due to the deterioration of breeding practices. The common practice of inbreeding emphasized on few valuable Arabian stallions and a limited cohort of out-standing ancestors to reinforce favorable traits in the offspring resulting consequently in a reduction of genetic diversity of some bloodstocks. Fortunately, some Arabian lines, especially the indigenous ones in the Middle East, are still having a considerable level of genetic diversity, which can be a good starting point for new strategic breeding programs. Here, Manifesto suggests applying population genetics approaches to assess the current genetic profile of the Arabian horses based on the agreed measures, as it has pinpointed in the first declaration of Manifesto, as well as the ancestor’s recognized pedigrees, the verified ones.





Khaleel Dirab 2004 (Rezaig/Khuzamah) breeder King Abdul Aziz Arabian Horse Center Dirab, shown at the Al Khaledia Horse Festival 2011 in a special section for KSA Desert Bred Arabians.



Al Fatih (Al Bashir/Al Sayida) 1997, stallion at Nejd Stud of Amir Turki Bin Fahd Bin Abdullah al-Saud, an Obayan Saifi



Nabeh (Haleem/Nabegha) 1993, stallion at Nejd Stud, an Obayan Saifi

One more interesting thing in the Arabian Horse Manifesto is that they consider ‘selection’ as a major Identity Principle. The Manifesto adopts the theme of selection as a tool for horse preservation. Will this be done according to scientific standards, or will it be limited to cultural preferences.

Desert Heritage: Further understanding of animal rights and needs could prevent problems at events such as Endurance and other competitions and situations. Should Manifesto promote education and information as a priority, so that animal welfare is improved?

Saria Almarzook: Raising awareness about animal welfare is one of our tasks, for sure. Our experts are aware of the importance of the “balance triangle”, so to speak, which comprises training volume, speed, and recovery, and we believe that we can improve the understanding of endurance training strategies and practices in the Arab world (and worldwide) that contribute to avoid any kind of adverse endurance horse welfare. Here the experience and knowledge of the western world may give good impulses as it has already been the case. But a good combination of western horsemanship and Bedouin Furusiya is highly needed. Moreover, we need regular convenient data about endurance competitions. It is commonly known that Arabian horses have special traits that make them special and unique. The cultural context of the interaction between the Bedouins, the Arabian horse breeders and guards and their horses is dominant here, and we have it always in our considerations and it is the reason behind adopting special welfare approach, which is still under revision.

Matthias Oster: It is also important to refer to the consequences of using the whip and the chain in halter shows. The Bedouin

way of managing their horses is completely different from the common practices. They were handling horses gently using the voice as an efficient aid and communicating with love instead of subjugation. Moreover, we should consider the role of women and children in the forming and refining the Arabian horse in the past. It was a horse of the tent as well as the horse of the desert, rather than being isolated in a box or stable away from his natural mates and ambient. We see great potential in the skills and experiences brought together by our group members to further enlighten these practices and maintain the good breeding traditions of the past Bedouin society, where their horses valued highly and considered as the dearest animals of the desert folk.

Desert Heritage: The online platform of Manifesto states that the organization will also care for reproduction, health care, performance tests and research. But a position toward modern reproduction technologies is not to be found. Are you accepting mass production of foals, through embryo transfer and other latest scenarios, for instance?

Matthias Oster: Manifesto is still at the beginning. Our vision is a return to the roots of the Arabian horse in Bedouin society in a way that is appropriate to our modern times. That encompasses more than asil breeding principles. Manifesto wants to heal the wounds that uprooting, exile and alienation have beaten the Arabian horse. This encompasses also a recollection of the original characteristics of the breed including its unique man-loving character and a restoration there necessary of the relation man – horse according to the model of the Bedouin. In this context I want to emphasize that modern reproductive technology should be used very cautiously. As a veterinarian I do not recommend the use of artificial insemination in maiden mares as natural covering is an important part of their development into a good breeding mare. Embryo transfer is a technology that can have its right if a mare cannot keep a pregnancy because of alterations in the uterus. But there are many open questions, especially regarding Epigenetic, that is the role of the recipient mother. So far, no one knows if those surrogate dams from different breeds will alter the genetic information of the foals.



Al Fatih (Al Bashir/Al Sayida)

Saria Almarzook: Research demonstrated recently that the epigenetic modifications may influence the embryonic development of the offspring. We know from the epigenetic research now that observations showed that epigenetic including memories of good and bad traits, can be passed down for many generations. However, artificial insemination along with embryo transfer are the most common assisted reproduction techniques applied to horses, and we must think about their application carefully and seriously. Under all conditions, the potential recipient Arabian mare should be strictly and critically assessed before making the decision to use her as a surrogate.

Moreover, we are worried about the reduction of the genetic variation in the Arabian horse breed due to inbreeding depression which is the outcome of using a small number of selected champion sires in the assisted reproduction techniques applied to Arabian horses like artificial insemination or embryo transfer. On the other hand, those modern technologies have their beneficial use and can help prevent the extinction of some rare bloodlines and strains. It is vital to keep in mind that genetic diversity is critical for a population to adapt to changing circumstances, enhance their fitness, the ability to survive and resist diseases.

Will the Manifesto member breeders or founders be able to draw attention to wrong practices, such as embryo transfer, and prevent them, except in cases of extreme necessity and under scientific supervision and strict control. I

don't know and I don't think it's easy at all.



Asil Iranian Arabs in Khuzistan, west Iran and in Yazd.
(Photographs by Monika Savier)



Desert Heritage: How will the Manifesto deal with horses who are now phenotype show horses, but tracing back in genotype to Bedouin horse?

Matthias Oster: Today there is a variety of asil bloodlines that can be found around the globe. In the West the picture of an ideal Arabian, promoted for instance by Judith Forbis, has changed the appearance of the Egyptian horses competing in the halter shows. These horses differ to a large extent from those Egyptian lines bred for sports and riding and they are distinct from the indigenous horses of the Orient. However, there are some breeders who try to have the privilege of the duality of both: ride-ability and beauty, simultaneously. Breeders have the right to breed their horses following their interest and preferences. However, they should be aware of changes happening away from the original Bedouin horse. We see it as our task to create a sort of haven for asil bloodlines and the original variety of types within the Bedouin horse, all of them have been riding horses. Not only the “right pedigree” is important, but also the right phenotype and the usefulness as riding horse.

Desert Heritage: Your friend and co-founder of Manifesto, Yasser Ghanim, says, “Every horse that is not ASIL we name it as hujna, which means not pure”. He mentions several worldwide influential horses, calling them hujna. Is this ‘line-bashing’ based on rumors doubting their pedigrees? In the past didn’t this have a commercial reason to affect the market value of other horses?



THE ROYAL STUD of HH King Hamad
Bin Isa al Khalifa in Al Roudha in Bahrain
(Photographs by Monika Savier)



Matthias Oster: Manifesto is not about “bashing” certain lines, but about preserving the asil population and its identity. We have a great concern about the fading Bedouin culture of preserving the asil horses and our vision and mission are not directed against anyone. We respect all breeders and highly appreciate their efforts in breeding Arabian horses in the best possible way. But we are beholden to the Bedouin tradition, like others in their own countries or subpopulations in the West to their own traditions, for instance in Spain. The exclusion of non-asil horses does not contradict the spirit of our movement. We do not want to hurt or offend anyone or criticize horses or breeding programs. Everybody is free to love and breed their favorite horses, and they are welcome to use our platform, even if their horses were not accepted in our planned studbook. The asil breeders need a market where they can sell and exchange their horses, and we believe that the commercial side is vital and important for every breeder.

Desert Heritage: Yasser Ghanim states: “Nobody can claim that there has been a biologic pureness in every single moment of the long history of the breed. The use of the terms ‘pure’ and ‘pure blood’ for the description of the Arabian horse has therefore to acknowledge the historic context and the cultural process of purity, instead to accept that at any time in history a genetic reservoir pure as gold was in existence. With this wise position one could close the chapter of line bashing and look ahead. The Arabian horse is a “pure ethnic group” but not a genetically pure breed. Do you agree?

Matthias Oster: We have reached a decisive point for the understanding of the term asil, used in the last 200 years by the Bedouin) or atiq, used before on the matter of purity. The Western understanding of a pure breed is totally different to the Bedouin concept of purity. For instance, the English Thoroughbred is considered a pure breed. It was created by the selection of foundation horses for a studbook for racehorses in England that has been closed afterwards. The WAHO definition of a purebred Arabian is similar: any horse listed in an accepted studbook. The Bedouin definition of pure or asil or atiq you have found a perfect description: a ‘pure ethnic group’. Edouard Al-Dahdah, one of our founders, has coined the expression of a socio-cultural unit between the Arabian horse and its breeders. But this unit was to a very great extent broken with the end of Bedouin society and with the export of horses to the west and to Egypt, apart from the Tahawy Bedouins and some other tribal horses. Therefore, we must establish and verify this lost unit by research into the information of the pedigrees in the case of exports. Or in the case of the indigenous horses, we must rely on the information that is provided by the horse experts of the Bedouin tribes. And additionally, we can use the information that modern genetic investigations can give us, especially for the introgression of foreign blood like the English Thoroughbred. In effect, we must prove the intact socio-cultural unit of horse and breeder in all our foundation horses.

Desert Heritage: How do you plan to present the Manifesto and its ideals to a wider audience?

Matthias Oster: We cannot turn back the time. Bedouin life will not come back from the dead. But we can, by knowing and understanding the past, preserve the valuable heritage that has been left of that past, a time that was characterized by a struggle for survival and uncertainty. This heritage by far transcends the Arabian horse and it plays a key role for the identity of the descendants of the Bedouin in the modern world. They can be proud of the fact that their ancestors have created a horse breed that has nothing comparable around the world, and that its extraordinary character is a mirror of the values of their past. But how will Manifesto heal the wounds that uprooting, exile and alienation have beaten the Arabian horse? And how will it protect the threatened remnants of asil horses from bad influence from outside? Towards uprooting we answer with a simple wake-up call: Back to the roots! This motto is already included in the Arabic word asil that is translated as pure, coming from the roots.

Desert Heritage: Back to the roots fits perfectly figuratively and biologically speaking. Roots are a wide and deep netting that stabilize the attitude. To equate Back to the roots with ‘pure’, might be fatal and misleading. The ‘pure breed’ in the connotation with selection, privileges and exclusion is not helpful for many breeders. If the expression ASIL is referring to the origin of the Bedouin breed, it would be a sufficient criterion?

The Royal breeding program of Bahrain is a unique matter. It is the most closely guarded collection of Arabian horses and the very rarest of the breed in the world. The Royal Stud of Bahrain was established in 1783, meaning that these horses have been bred selectively for more than 200 years by now.



Matthias Oster: Indeed, it is sufficient. If the origin in the Bedouin culture is established, we can consider a horse asil. This means that we know the Bedouin breeder or the tribe and the strain and sub strain of the horse, rasan and marbat in Arabic. This information is necessary to accept a horse as asil, as this is exactly the way the Bedouin judged the asil status of a horse. As many pedigrees go back more than 100 years, not all information on all ancestors has been preserved, out of various reasons. Here lies the challenge, a challenge that we want to take on as team and with the support of all help we can find. It is not a completely matter of black and white, like a Western approach would like to have, but a matter of socio-cultural aspects, a matter of Bedouin 'thinking'. I can honestly tell you and the readers that in our group, we are still in the process of discussion.

Desert Heritage: The origin of the Arabian horses was adopted by selection towards our manifold needs, both in sports as well as in halter shows. By this the phenotype and to some degree also the genotype was altered dramatically. This has always been. Who went on Djihad in the 7th century, formed a war-horse from the original breed, it would save his life. The Khedives of Egypt formed their desert horses imported from the Nejd into representative horses. And whoever breeds Arabian horses for the means of projecting his own self in the show ring, projects his yearning for complete beauty into his breeding concept. Where will Manifesto fix to turn back the wheel?

Matthias Oster: Our concept is, as I have already explained, to create a consciousness and understanding by our planned efforts, like the internet platform or real events for the Arabian horses that will combine the best of both worlds, East and West. It is not about a new association or just a 'register for asil horses worldwide', but a movement, a collection of all those who love the asil horse and want to connect with us. In the spirit of the Bedouin, we call together to a universal majlis. The majlis of the Bedouin was the central place of pronunciation and discussion and at the same time the school of the desert in which the youth could learn everything important for life in their community. There every aspect of life was addressed, tribal affairs, politics, news, art in form of stories and poems, and the horse, of course. By the gathering of all men, and in rare cases also women, the majlis was synonymous with the oral archive of the tribe that encompassed both human and equine genealogies. There the self, the identity of each member and of the community was formed, including public opinion and a common conscience. A sort of this place the Manifesto wants to erect. And because we live in the 21st century and in a globalized world, we want to do this by the means of a virtual platform in the internet, which will be - similar to the majlis - a virtual school and a virtual place for the meeting of people and discussions on all topics regarding the relation man - Arabian horse, including, as already mentioned, all aspects of animal welfare. This virtual and universal majlis will be open to anyone who wants to support our goals. The more people connect the louder our voice will be and the more impressive our influence. But we will also promote the real life with Arabians, like riding, performance tests and showing in an appropriate way.



Desert Heritage: If Manifesto should indeed try to separate Arabian horses in pure -asil or impure - hujna, this could be done only by scientific detection methods. Which genetic instruments could produce this?

Saria Almarzook: Again, here we assure that asil status of an Arabian horse is highly bound to the socio-cultural status. However, Bedouin selected and bred progeny from superior horses for several generations until a pure line of horses with only the desired characteristics has been established. We all agree that at this point the original – first version of ‘Arabian horse studbook’ was closed within the Bedouin culture. All breeding events outside this context and post this point are genetically and culturally questionable. Our conceptual framework is not opposing any horse stock, it is in some way very similar to the ‘Thoroughbred’s studbook, which has been closed and maintained for generations, meaning it includes only purebred Thoroughbreds born to purebred sires and dams. Genetic investigations can absolutely support the profiling of the currently living Arabian horses and assess their genetic diversity within and between their stocks. As well as comparing the current genetic pool to the former one when materials like fossils, will hopefully be available for our genetic experts. Using the proper genetic markers and methods including in-depth calculations of allele frequencies, genetic distance calculations, combined with pedigree analysis.

Desert Heritage: How can Manifesto create a positive forward looking discussion platform that is realistic and makes possible further support and enthusiasm?

Matthias Oster: The concept of Manifesto is creating a culture of remembrance simplified in the motto: Back to the roots. Our goal is to preserve the rich heritage of the past that was entrusted into our hands: The Bedouin horse. If we do not know the past, we will not be able to understand how the present grievances threaten the future of the remaining asil populations. Our self as Manifesto is that we are a group of idealists discussing all matters connected with our goal. Our task is to translate the Bedouin way of breeding and handling horses into our modern and globalized world. This is a process with open end, as you demand. It is a fascinating majlis already there we come together from different backgrounds, even worlds. And our vision is to create a universal majlis through the planned internet-platform and planned real life activities with Arabian horses. It is a task not easily reached. It will take time, maybe some years. But we are determined to meet this challenge. And we kindly ask for support from all who can identify with our vision. Thank you very much for your attention and we will be glad to inform you and your readers of our future progress in promoting the original Bedouin horse.

Desert Heritage: Dr. Almarzook and Dr. Oster, thank you for your time and explanations about your exciting new project. We are sure it will of great interest for the breeders of authentic Arabians.